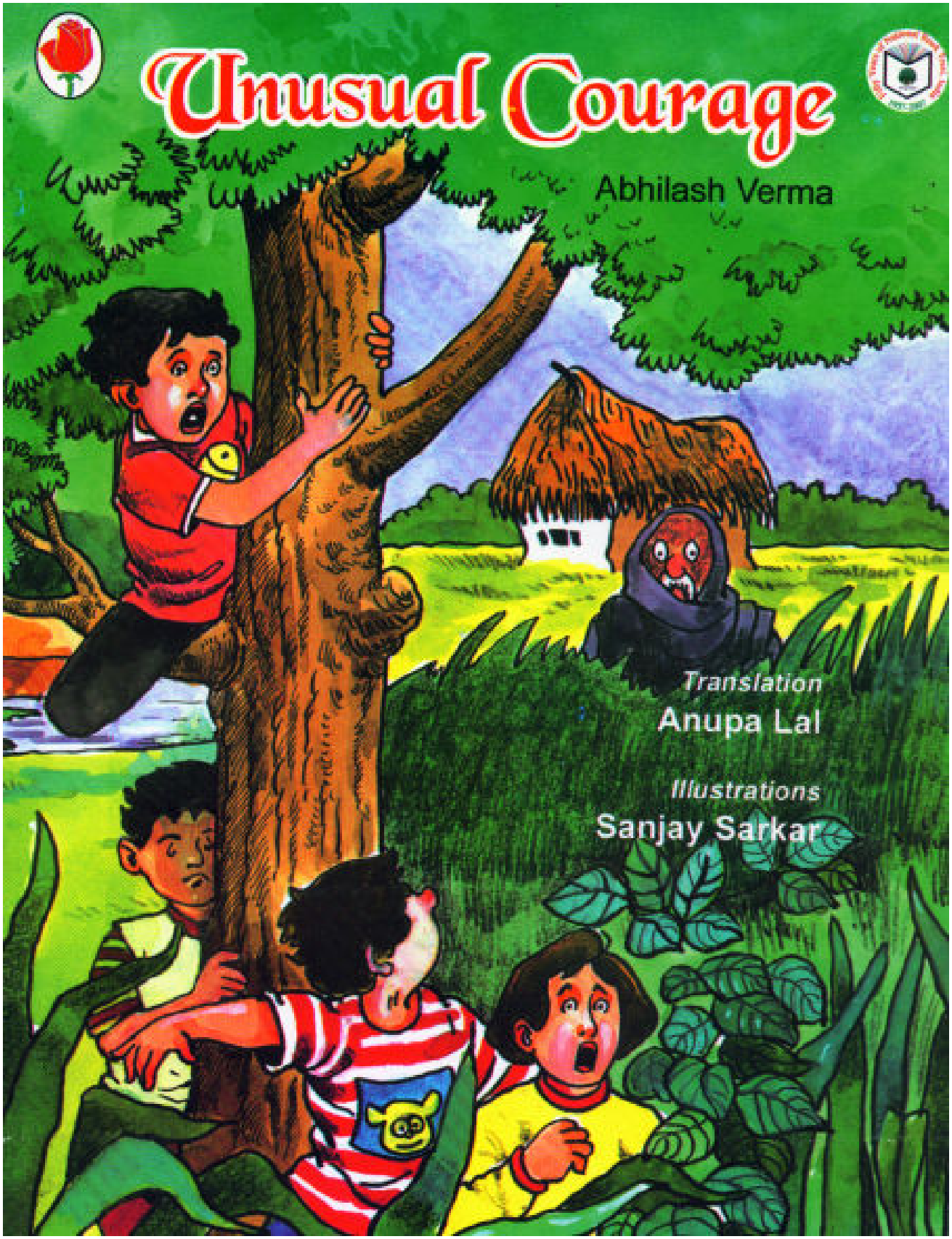
Unusual Courage
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Translation
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Illustrations
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Raju was considered a coward not just at home, but in the entire locality. In fact it was hard to find any good quality in him. He was not only a poor student but a very naughty one too. From throwing water on a classmate to pinching another boy's tiffin, Raju was always up to one mischief or the other! But neither scoldings nor beatings, at home or in school, made any impact on him. Everyone declared, "Reforming Raju is tougher than straightening a dog's tail!"

In the summer holidays Raju went with his parents, his sister Rekha, his Chacha, Chachi and his cousins Ranu and Bunty to his grandparents' home in a village named Aarud. Raju's Dadaji and Dadiji lived in a large house with many mango trees in the garden. The four children, who were between the ages of eleven and thirteen, romped all over the house and garden, eating raw mangoes to their hearts' content. They broke so many glasses and other containers that Raju's parents and both Chacha and Chachi felt alarmed! But Dadaji and Dadiji only smiled.

"Children will be children," they said. "Don't stop them. Let them play."

One morning the four youngsters were playing cricket in a large room. Their ball first smashed a clock on the wall and then shattered a tube light! The floor was littered with glass. This time the grown-ups were really annoyed.

"No more playing cricket inside the house," they said firmly. "Morning and evening, go outside and play. Stay at home during the hot afternoons and go to bed early at night." A timetable was drawn up for them and some other rules were also spelt out to be followed strictly. For a few days the children meekly obeyed the new timetable, both at home and outside. But they felt cramped and restless.

Every evening Raju, Rekha, Ranu and Bunty played cricket in a sprawling field, along with the children of the village. One evening, as it was growing dark, a boy named Vasudev hit the

ball right across the field, deep into some bushes. Raju ran to retrieve the ball. But as he neared the bushes, the sudden silence and the ghostly rustling of leaves in the darkness frightened him and he returned empty-handed.

"What happened?" asked Ranu. "Didn't you find the ball?"

"No. We'll look for it in the morning," said Raju, trying to hide his fear. But the other children sensed how frightened he really was and laughed aloud. It was not the first time people had laughed at Raju for being a coward. And it was not the first time he had felt bad about being laughed at. But he had never felt as humiliated as he did today. He decided to go back to search for the ball when Vasudev stopped him, "Don't go near the bushes in the dark," he said.

But Raju's shame had driven out all his cowardice. He went back to search for the ball, found it after a while and returned.

Vasudev, being older than Raju, tried to caution him. "Raju, it is good to be brave, but you shouldn't be foolhardy! At this hour there could be snakes in the undergrowth. And in any case, we are not supposed to go too close to the bushes or beyond them."

"Why?" Raju wanted to know.

"Several people have glimpsed a ghost beyond the bushes! There is a pool about three kilometres from here. They say the ghost lives somewhere near it."

The thought of a ghost at the time when it was becoming dark scared many of the children and they hurried home.

That night, Raju tossed and turned in his bed. He kept hearing the words of his science teacher. "No one has yet

been able to prove the existence of ghosts. It is foolish to believe in them. In reality, ghosts do not exist."

"If I can solve the mystery of this ghost, people will never again consider me a coward," thought Raju. "I must

find out the truth. I must." Raju's thoughts kept him awake. It was well beyond midnight when he finally went to sleep.

In the morning he told Rekha, Ranu and Bunty what

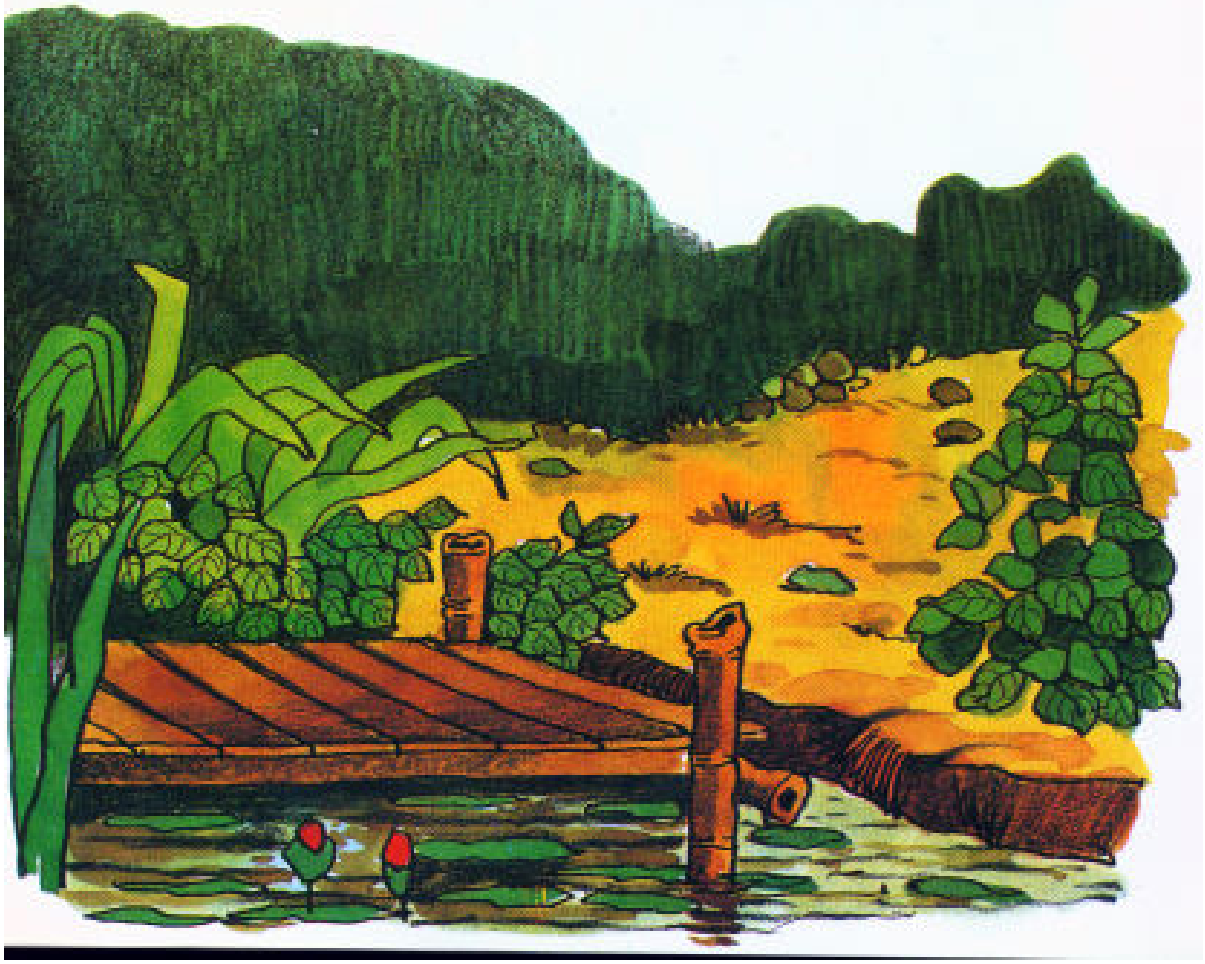
he had decided. "Don't get mixed up in all this, Raju!" they warned. But when they realized that he had made up his mind, they promised to help him. The four cousins formed a team to discover the truth about the ghost.

It was one o'clock in the afternoon. The grown-ups went to their rooms to have a nap after lunch. Quietly the four children sneaked out of the house and walked swiftly to the sprawling field where they played every evening. They crossed it and slowed down near the bushes. Then

they stopped and looked around. No one was visible in the strong sunlight, except for one or two bullock carts in the distance and a few animals chewing cud in the shade of a few leafy trees. The children pushed their way through the dense bushes and went further.

A dusty, stony path lay before them flanked by shrubs and babool, peepal and banyan trees. There was an eerie silence everywhere.

"I'm scared. I want to go home!" whispered Bunty, the youngest. But the others persuaded him to stay and they continued to walk carefully down the path. The foliage became denser. All was quiet except for the sound of an



occasional cricket. Then suddenly Ranu said, "Look! There's the pool!"

Through the thick foliage the children saw sunlight glinting on a sheet of water. Some birds flew from one tree to another and almost brushed Rekha's hair with their wings! Rekha screamed. Then all was quiet once again.

Raju looked around him attentively. Where the path ended, the ground sloped down to the pool. It was a large pool, brimming with water, despite the heat. The area seemed absolutely deserted. Raju's eyes then fell on

a small thatched hut to his left. He advanced towards it when the others tried to stop him.

"Don't go there! It could be dangerous!"

"I have to unravel the mystery of the ghost," claimed Raju and walked on. Looking right and left in fear, the other children followed him.

Raju reached the hut and called out, "Is anyone there?" The heart beats of all the four children had become fast.

Raju called out again, "Is anyone there?"

Still no one answered or appeared. Mustering all his courage, Raju pushed open the door of the hut and went inside. He saw a few utensils scattered about and a torn blanket. That was all. Finding no other clue in their search for the ghost, the children waited for a while and then returned home.

After dinner that night they quietly conferred with one another. All four decided to go to the pool again the following afternoon and discover the whereabouts of the ghost by hook or by crook, before returning home. With this resolve, they went off to sleep.

The following afternoon, they left the house at 3 p.m. They walked to the field, crossed it, treaded the lonely stony path again and reached the pool. Then they stopped.

It was absolutely, frighteningly quiet. Raju looked at the hut. He thought he saw something moving inside it. Silently he crept towards the hut. The others stayed back, looking around fearfully. Raju had almost reached the hut when a figure draped in a blanket

appeared in the doorway and hurled a stone at him! Blood began to flow from Raju's head. But he stood where he was, undeterred. The other three children moved closer to the injured boy. For a few moments the figure and Raju confronted each other. Then the figure yelled, "Run away from here or I'll kill you all!"

But the children stood their ground. Slowly Raju advanced and the figure retreated. Suddenly Raju snatched away the blanket! The others gasped but Raju was unafraid. The figure who stood before them was no ghost but a painfully thin, skeleton-like man with boils and sores all over his body.

"Why have you been frightening the villagers by pretending to be a ghost?" demanded Raju.

The man stood silent for a few moments, lost in thought. Then he said, "Children, I won't hurt you. Sit down without fear and I will tell you my story. But first, if you have a piece of cloth, then bandage this boy's head. His wound is still bleeding."

Ranu bandaged Raju's wound with her handkerchief. Then the man sat down opposite the children and began to talk in a low voice.

"Once I used to live in this very Aarud village and earned a living by farming. Then about eleven years ago, many villagers fell ill with the spread of malaria. My two year old daughter, Munni, succumbed to the disease. There was no doctor to help us. There was a compounder

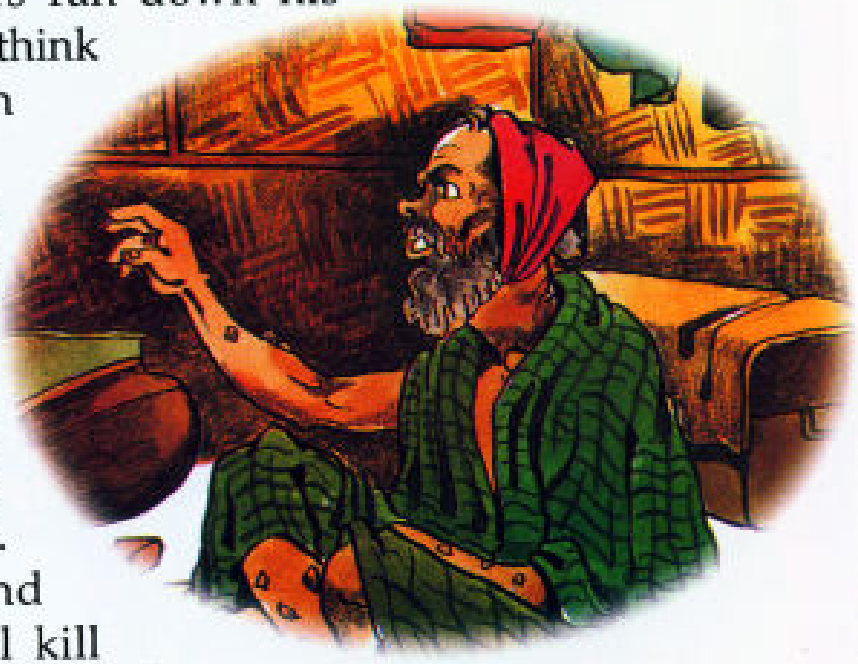
but he ran away as the malaria spread further. My wife burned with fever for fifteen days. Then she also died. I too lay almost unconscious for a month or so. When at last I was able to get up, I realized I had lost everything! I was alone in the world. Like a mad man I roamed through the streets of the village. I was in a daze. I spoke to no one about my grief.

The village children made fun of me and pelted stones at me. No one stopped them. The elders just watched and remained silent. For many days I quietly endured this unkind treatment. But one day when some boys were tormenting me, I lost my temper and threw stones at them. The angry

villagers tied me to a tree and beat me black and blue.

Since then I have been living here like an outcast. There is a village named Sujlana about six kilometres from here. Every few days I go there to beg for food. That is how I have survived. Once or twice people from Aarud have spotted me here and run away in terror. Since then the villagers believe that a ghost haunts this pool and its surroundings."

"Now you know the story of my miserable life," said the old man. Tears ran down his cheeks. "I do not think I will live much longer."



"You must come with us to the village," Raju said firmly.

"No! No!" The old man looked very frightened. "The villagers and their children will kill me."

"They will not," said Raju confidently. "You have suffered enough. We will not let you suffer any more."

A gleam of hope came into the old man's eyes. The four children started walking with him towards their

village. It was about seven in the evening when they crossed the bushes and entered the field. The children playing in the field took one look at the old man and ran away.

"Stop!" shouted Raju and Bunty. "Don't be scared. Come back!" Reluctantly the children returned. Raju and Rekha explained everything to them. They got them to promise that no one would ever hurt the old man or let any other child of the village hurt or bother him. Then the four cousins escorted the old man to their Dadaji's house.

At home the grown-ups were apparently worried.

Where had the children slipped away in the hot afternoon? They had not even returned to have their evening snacks. Ah! There they are at last! But the adults were surprised to see an old man with the children.

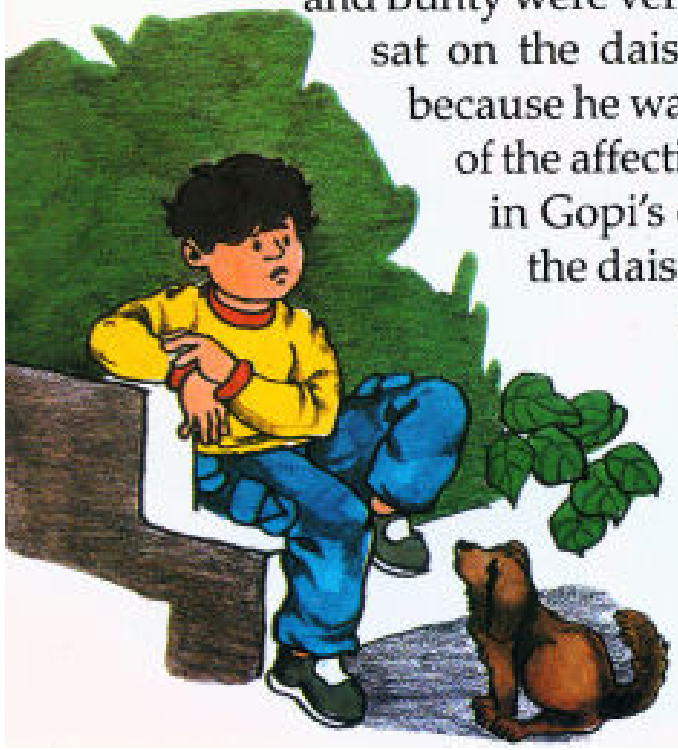
Raju went up to his grandfather with hope and confidence. "Dadaji," he said, "this person is from our own village. He lost his wife and his daughter some time ago. The villagers treated him so badly that for several years he has been living alone near the pool. Dadaji, how can we help him? He is the one who is considered as a ghost."

Raju's grandfather was a highly respected and influential person in the village. The Sarpanch and other village elders always listened to his advice. Dadaji first

praised the children for their courage and initiative. Then he said, "I will speak to the Sarpanch and other elders right now, so that this poor man gets justice. But first we must take him to a doctor for treatment."

By nightfall the entire village knew that the mystery of the ghost had been solved. The so called ghost was an old resident of the village named Gopi. The following day a large meeting was held in the village. The villagers were asked to assist Gopi in starting a new life and children were instructed not to bother him in any way. Gopi's six bighas of land and his old home were returned to him. After a few weeks of medical treatment, he was fit and healthy once again.

One evening the villagers organized a function to honour Raju and the other three children. Rekha, Ranu and Bunty were very pleased and excited as they sat on the dais. Raju was happy too. Not because he was being praised. But because of the affection and gratitude he had seen in Gopi's eyes, as they sat together on the dais.



Deep inside, Raju felt that he had done something worthwhile, something really good, perhaps for the first time in his life.

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